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# Negotiating Spaces and the Public–Private Boundary: Language Policies Versus Language Use Practices in Odessa

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## Abstract

While the so-called “end of public space” literature, focusing on encroachment of private interests and state surveillance, has contributed to critical thinking of access (or the lack thereof) to public space, and the loss of publicity of public space, the conceptual tools such literature offers to understand contestations in and over public space have remained underdeveloped or, at best, underexplored. This article builds on the above debates to provide further empirical evidence on the way actors of a country compete over, and negotiate, the use of public space and the way it should be regulated. Empirically, it illustrates competition and negotiation of the use of language in Odessa, the third largest city of Ukraine, where Ukrainian should be the official language but Russian is widely used. Theoretically, starting from the way public and private are negotiated, and the extent to which this happens, we will suggest that resistance to state measures, and policies, that do not suit a considerable portion of a population may happen not only formally but also informally. The practices, tactics, and mechanisms used may, however, remain “invisible” for some time and then surprise everyone by emerging, all of a sudden, one day. A possible way to notice these dynamics is to engage with an “everyday” approach, thus acknowledging that everyday practices are a meaningful, and useful, site for understanding sociopolitical developments in the process of the construction of “the political.”

## Keywords

Odessa, Ukraine, identity, resistance, public spaces

## Introduction

While the so-called “end of public space” literature, focusing on encroachment of private interests and state surveillance (Mitchell, 1995; Sorkin, 1992), has contributed to critical thinking of access (or the lack thereof) to public space, and the loss of publicity of public space, the conceptual tools such literature offers to understand contestations in and over public space have remained underdeveloped or, at best, underexplored. In an attempt to fill this gap, a recently

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emerged body of literature has started looking at the role of the “everyday” offering two interpretative frameworks. The first, starting from the blurred boundary between the public and the private, has looked at practices that had been largely considered as “private” to explore the way they might end up affecting the public sphere. From consumption to participation in cultural and social events as well as political participation (Bassin & Kelly, 2012; Edensor, 2002; Foster, 2002; Perchoc, 2013; Skey, 2011), studies have demonstrated the interrelatedness of public and private spaces and, in particular, how attitudes and behaviors initially considered affecting only private sphere of life may end up affecting macro-environments and macro-processes. The second has attempted to address a wide array of literature on competition over public spaces (Hou, 2010; Iveson, 2013) or even appropriation, or at least attempt to appropriate, of public spaces through resistance, insurgency, or assertion of citizen’s rights (Holston, 2008; Isin, 2008; Massey, 2000). Framed in a state–citizenship competition framework, such attitudes have also been regarded as a reaction against excessive control of public spaces (Atkinson, 2003; Lofland, 1998; Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 2000), which limit possibilities for political expression in public space (publicity in space) and citizenship. This article builds on the above debates to provide further empirical evidence on the way actors of a country compete over, and negotiate, the use of public space and the way it should be regulated. We will use our empirical evidence to shed light on a specific case linked to the use of the official state language in a context where citizens might try, in specific situations, to question its use or to give preference to a different language for a number of reasons. By doing so, we broaden the traditional urban studies focus on public spaces such as streets, sidewalks parks, and squares (Orum & Neal, 2010), to consider a range of public institutions, among them educational spaces as meaningful for negotiating urban public space. We will be documenting informal everyday practices as a way for nonpolitical—or politicized—actors to seek confrontation with the authorities over the use and appropriation of public spaces.

The observation site was Odessa, the third biggest city of Ukraine and located in the south of the country. The city was established by Catherine the Great under the auspices of the Russian empire and was prevalently inhabited by Russian speakers at the time of Ukrainian independence in 1991. Attempts to make Ukrainian the sole official language of the country, ultimately embedding this idea in the 1996 constitution, were intended to regulate the use of languages, if not in private spaces, at least its use in public ones. As a result, it was expected that, after some adaptation period, the language used in public administration and educational institutions would be Ukrainian, in Odessa as in the rest of the country. However, what would happen in a situation where a significant segment of the local population was requested to switch from one language to another, at least with regard to its use in public spaces? Empirical studies have given little attention to such a question so that fieldwork was intended to explore to what extent would Odessans be willing and able to comply with official instructions provided from above with regard to the use of public space. These questions may also prompt to question the very meaning of public space and its boundary, or at least its perceived boundaries in the mind of the informants.

The above-mentioned questions were kept in mind during a fieldwork that lasted for almost 24 months between August 2003 and July 2006 during which one of the authors conducted intensive observation in six local schools, interviews with 49 Odessans from two generations, and a long participant observation that included around a hundred of informal interviews. While it is not possible to claim representativeness of the entire population, an accurate sampling and a boosted depth of data collection may compensate for its limited coverage in terms of width (see, *inter alia*, Geertz, 1973; Lonkila, 1997; Morris & Polese, 2014). The collected data were initially processed to inform several articles on language and identity in Ukraine that were part of a PhD dissertation on informal renegotiation of policy measures from the bottom. They were then revisited for a second project on everyday identities that led to the publication of two books and several articles, taking into account the everyday dimension that had, meanwhile, been brilliantly elaborated by some major scholars in the field.<sup>1</sup>

These steps have informed our analysis and suggested possible ways to further development in the study of competition over public spaces, allowing us to propose a twofold goal for this article. Empirically, after illustrating the way Odessans have attempted to negotiate the use of

language in public spaces, we will suggest two things. One is that, taking advantage of the blurred boundary between public and private spaces, they may attempt to stretch to the maximum their private spaces. This may go as far as to eventually perceive as private, or at least not fully public, some symbolic spaces that the state might want to treat as public. This may include, for instance, informal communication between a teacher and a pupil or between two civil servants when they are not talking of work or on official duties, even if this happens in a public building. We also look at the situation where an informal negotiation on the use of language occurs and that, when this becomes routine, it generated a constant “state of exception” (Agamben, 2005). We refer here to the situation, observed regularly, that once both interlocutors decide not to use the official language in a space that may be regarded, in many respects, as public (a school, a public administration building). In spite of this happening routinely, and being remarked by both the researcher and acknowledged by the informants, when questioned informants showed a tendency to construct a narrative suggesting that the choice of a language other than the state one while performing public duties, was happening “only once, only here and only now.” The explanation they could provide might even be convincing (i.e., I was talking to someone who does not speak Ukrainian; today it was a particularly complicated subject and the students do not have the vocabulary yet). However, when this exception is systematic and recurrent, it generates a situation that intrigues the social scientists who might as well conclude that this “exception” is actually the norm, and the norm thus becomes the exception.

Illustration of the above-mentioned dynamics and demonstration of their social relevance will be used to inform our theoretical argument. Resistance to state measures, and policies, that do not suit a considerable portion of a population may happen not only formally but also informally. When this happens, actors attempt to symbolically occupy and re-regulate the use of (some) public spaces in a way to minimize state influence in a given situation. The practices, tactics, and mechanisms can remain unnoticed for some time, or even in the long run, to national statistics, quantitative analyses, or even qualitative studies assuming that, once a policy has been adopted, it will go all the way down and eventually bring change to the selected target group. The use of an everyday approach, taking into account apparently insignificant practices, happening only “here and now” can help shed light on these phenomena and dynamics and bring them out of their invisibility.

By doing this, we will draw attention to the fact that everyday practices are a meaningful, and useful, site for understanding sociopolitical developments in the process of the construction of “the political,” a definition that includes a large spectrum of behaviors and situations that are not always acknowledged as formally informing the political dimensions of a state (Navarro-Yashin, 2002). The everyday dimension is of particular importance here, and we are inspired both by a number of studies on several world regions (Edensor, 2002, 2006; Fox, 2017; Perchoc, 2018; Scott, 1985; Skey, 2015) but also on a tradition of studies on the region leading to the idea that Soviet citizens consolidated “tactics of the habitat” (Kotkin, 1997) or resistance (Johnston, 2011) in order to manage or negotiate their interactions with the state that was supposed to rule them.

The next section provides an overview on the debate on resistance and negotiation that will be used, in the following section, to discuss the roles of informality both in the frame of this article and in social science research to address the issue of “invisibility” of phenomena. An everyday framework, it will shown, may be a way to bring out of the shadow practices and dynamics that might go unnoticed even for a long period despite being significant and relevant to a given situation, as the following presentation of empirical data will show.

## **Resistance, Conflict, and Negotiation**

Debates inspired by Michel Foucault’s (1972, 1994) framework on power have helped understanding power not only as coercive, but also as diffused, present everywhere, embodied in discourses and knowledge, and transcending politics, power is also apprehended as potentially “productive,” as a positive force with an ability to make things happen, achieve outcomes, and even build pleasure (Foucault, 1982, 2001). Looking at power from a broad perspective resistance can also be regarded as composed by a wide array of options and attitudes, “A

subaltern response to power; a practice that challenges and which might undermine power” (Vinhagen & Lilja, 2007, p. 1). In this lies, in our view, a major difference between “resistance” and “agency” with the former excluding all practices that, although they might undermine power, do not happen from a subaltern position. Being a “practice” implies a sense of action (understood in a broad sense, including discourses), and being apprehended as a “response to power” implies a dynamic relationship between the two concepts. Our understanding of resistance is thus framed in a broad context that we see evolving in a sort of circle. When a given decision-making institution issues a new rule or law it is likely to encounter resistance or questioning by the “decision takers” on the ground or “street-level bureaucrats” as well as those citizens on the receiving end of policy making. If power can be regarded as embedded, and originating, in state institutions, its applicability requires a subject on which it can be exerted. Citizens, and the society at large, are thus only apparently passive actors in a state. Not only they give state institutions a *raison d’être* by allowing themselves to get ruled by state institutions. They also, and equally important, contribute to the confirmation and reproduction of a state through a mechanism that Migdal (2001) has illustrated allow a state and a society to reproduce themselves through interaction. This symbiotic relationship between citizens and their state, and vice versa, may be regarded in fact as the very essence of the relationship between the public and the private with regard to a state that is eventually composed by individuals and thus “peopled” (Jones, 2007/2011) rather than a monolithic entity with a homogeneous and consistent position on all its actions (Kasza, 2002).

Indeed, by performing participation and contribution to the development of public spaces people do not necessarily accept the message but rather rebroadcast it (Isaacs & Polese, 2015; Polese, Morris, Pawlusz, & Seliverstova, 2017). After all, the very notion of performance carries with it the idea of individual difference and distinction. True that one can regard the state as primarily attempting to control, within the idea of democratic management, in the interest of all (Hénaff & Strong, 2001; Sennett, 1998, 2006, 2010). True also, however, that citizens regularly attempt reappropriation of public spaces through various forms of resistance, insurgency, or assertion of citizen’s rights (Holston, 2008; Isin, 2008; Massey, 2000) and this can be regarded as a reaction against excessive control of public spaces (Atkinson, 2003; Lofland, 1998; Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 2000) but can also be ascribed into a wider framework of contentious politics (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2012).

There are, however, other forms of resistance and negotiation of public spaces and their use. The one we use for this article can be called “political informality.” The word informality has been used, since the 1950s, to refer to economic practices hidden from the state or its institutions and are somehow related to what has been called the informal sector (Lewis, 1954, 1959; see also International Labour Organization, 1972). However, a number of critical studies have somehow disentangled informality from “the economy” in at least two ways. First, a growing number of scholars (Granovetter, 1984; Scott, 1985) have been endorsing the distinction between the market and the society (Gudeman, 2001; Hann & Hart, 2009), remarking that several transactions, apparently fitting the category of “market transactions,” are in fact embedded in social and cultural dynamics that have little to do with the market itself, or even with economic transactions (Williams, Round, & Rodgers, 2013). This has eventually led to the basis of the idea behind new institutional economics, more prone to look at nonmonetary and non-strictly economic transactions to explain economic phenomena. In addition to an economic function, informality may also have a significant political role. We start here from Scott’s definition of infrapolitics, suggesting that “the accumulation of thousands or even millions of such petty acts can have massive effect for warfare, land rights, taxes and property relations” (Scott, 2012, p. xx) to maintain that an informal practice, widely performed by a portion of a population that may end up having an effect on policy making. It is possible that these thousands, or millions, of people performing a given action are unaware of one another but the final effect is that they, slowly but restlessly, provoke change a given political measure. We see two possible directions in this respect. One is that a government realizes the uselessness of a given measure, at least the way it is formulated in a given moment, and formally changes the measure. For instance, when the Iranian government realized that female traffic police personnel were regularly ignored by male drivers they preferred to phase them out to fine or imprison half of the drivers in the country.

The other is that a state negotiates less and less a given sphere of life of a country and let informal relations emerge and develop. In other words, there is a rule, and the state expects that people abide it but does not check or use coercion to secure compliance (Polese, 2010; Rekhviashvili, 2015, 2016; Rodgers 2006, 2007). The phenomenon has been widely studied in postsocialist spaces where Ledeneva (1998, 2006, 2013) has eventually applied the concept of informal governance to refer to a “sistema” of power relations that allow a country to be regulated informally even in some spheres of high politics.

Informality, both political and economic, may be used to resist. It can be placed on a continuous line (Polese & Kevlihan, 2015) with one extreme being petty, street-level, apparently uncoordinated actions that inform Scott’s concept of infrapolitics. Moving along the line we can find actions that are more and more coordinated, and thus visible, until we reach contentious politics and then, further, insurgency that can be regarded as a successful case where non-state actors manage to seize power and reverse the order of a system (Kevlihan, 2013).

As a result, informality—at least as we see it—creates, or at least identifies, spaces where laws, rules, and dynamics of interaction are renegotiated according to power relations, resulting in several consequences. First, informality is a space, in the geographical meaning of the term, where the encounter between citizens and state institutions generates an opportunity for informal governance to emerge. In line with Harvey (1996), we understand space as folded into social relations through practical activities. This paves the way to the idea that space is a continual construction as a result of the agency of things encountering each other in more or less organized circulations. By looking at this aspect, we can regard space as not necessarily and absolute container, where things are passively embedded, but as a co-production of those proceedings as a process, and this is more proper to understand the evolution of informal practices (Thrift, 2009). We become thus close to nomadism and mobility conceived as spaces of resistance envisaged by Hardt and Negri (2001): between voice and exit is a kind of “refusal” in space and time.

## **On Invisibility and the Everyday**

If there have been attempts to measure economic informality (Putniņš & Sauka, 2015; Schneider & Buehn, 2013) little has been done to measure political informality. After all, economy-related activities emerge at some point. Money paid under the table must be spent, or moved somewhere, underreported production can be measured by the surplus of electricity consumption in a given area (Kaufmann, 2005), but political informality has little chance to emerge and become visible. This is an assumption that has remained in the air for some time now. Already in 1968, scholars of the caliber of Hobsbawm and Rude suggested that people tend to ignore phenomena until they make headlines. Informal practices are invisible until their aggregate becomes inherently visible. According to Scott,

So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes. It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond. (Scott, 1990, p. 199)

Invisibility refers, in our understanding, to the (temporary) period between when a phenomenon is born (even if the “birth” or the genesis of a phenomenon is extremely difficult to spot) and when it becomes widely known (and here also we lack the definition of “widely known”: how many people should it reach before it can be “widely known”?). One can think, however, at the gap in time when the ISIS was born and when it started appearing on major media regularly, or the anti-austerity movement in Spain that gave the impression to gather, almost overnight, a million of people on the street. Such actions, despite being regarded as a visible “counter-hegemonic embodiment” ( . . . ) are largely politically invisible, as they do not conform to conventional understandings of politics” (Vinhagen & Johansson, 2013, p. 10). One can also think of a product or a service that started being appreciated by millions of customers. In the period before this visibility, there is a long and meticulous work by a large number of individuals

that went, in many respects, unnoticed for some time. This is what we call “invisibility” in the social science, since social scientists have, at least in theory, the instruments to notice such phenomena before they go viral. However, in fact, this does not happen often and phenomena, or even scientists, working on these phenomena are discovered incidentally, or when a given phenomenon reaches proportions that it is impossible to ignore it.

Research on the everyday (Hart & Risley, 1995; Lefebvre & Levich, 1987; Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991; Shotter, 1993) offers, at least to some extent, a solution to the invisibility issue. We use “everyday” here in a meaning encompassing any kind of quotidian and “banal” practices, often performed unconsciously or with little awareness of their macro and long-term consequences. We perceive the everyday, and everyday resistance, as located between those two spaces, including visible and invisible actions performed individually—uncoordinated actions reproduced by a number of individuals end up affecting the dynamics and mechanisms of the society these actions are embedded in. An everyday framework has been useful to notice the unnoticed, to direct attention to phenomena that do not emerge powerfully but remain at the margin of a society. A limp flag, resting quietly and tacitly accepted as confirming nationhood, has been opposed to a flag that is waved by political activists (Foster, 2002), studies of queuing practices in airports or messages delivered silently, tacitly, or informally (Eriksen, 1993; Pawłusz & Polese, 2017) have pointed at the significance of everyday practices and suggested ways not only to notice them but also to systematize data collection in order to come up with accounts shedding light on phenomena that would otherwise remain invisible for a long time. Attention to the everyday has been sporadically used in our target region to argue that Soviet ordinary people deployed a number of “tactics of the habitat” (Kotkin, 1997), including “avoidance” and “bricolage” to renegotiate their relationship with the state (Johnston, 2011). Further studies have confirmed the importance of informal renegotiation framing in, and adopting a methodological approach, of the everyday to spot possible contradictions between state intentions and results (Polese, 2010), or between official narratives of a state and the way ordinary citizens ended up living them (Pawłusz & Seliverstova, 2016; Richardson, 2008; Rodgers, 2007).

## **Linguistic Policies and Preferences From Ukraine to Odessa**

The complexity of the language issue in Ukraine in the 1990s, and beyond, has been the object of a number of debates and at the center of informative studies. Scholars have illustrated the different roles of the two languages (Arel, 1995; Janmaat, 2000; Rodgers, 2007), the relationship between the two, and the political meaning of the use of one language against the other (Fournier, 2002; Kuzio, 1997/2016; Polese & Wylegala, 2008a, 2008b). They have also taken into account what can be called the regionalization issue, with either language acquiring or losing importance in a given context or region of the country (Arel, 2006). Language and identities issues being highly controversial in the country, not only in political but also intellectual debates, this article lays no claim to try to explain the complexity of the situation in such short space. This section is thus intended to illustrate the situation, as perceived by the authors and documented by a collection of policies and measures adopted by the Ukrainian parliament at the time of the fieldwork (see Polese, 2009, 2011, for an elaboration). What is important here is the official position of the Ukrainian state that, after long discussing the language question, opted for a monolingual model with Ukrainian as a sole state language. This position was embedded in the constitution adopted in 1996 and giving Russian the status of minority language. As a result, as the main language of education with the exception of areas with a substantial presence of a minority. Study of Russian and Ukrainian languages had already been made compulsory according to the State Program on the Development of the Ukrainian Language adopted in February 1991, but the 1996 constitution provided a further momentum for the Ukrainian language. Indeed, from 51% and 49% of Ukrainian preschools and schools (both primary and secondary) using Ukrainian as mean of instruction in the 1990s; by 2001 these figures would officially increase to 76% and 70%. The regions with the lowest amount of schools in Ukrainian were Odesa (47%), Zaporizhzhia (45%), Luhansk (17%), Donetsk (14%), and Republic of Crimea (0.8%; Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies, 2002). Elite schools such as Lyceum, gymnasium, or college (allowing enrolment in a university without entrance exams)

were a particularly distinguished target, in an attempt to educate the elites, and the future elites, to the use of their language (Popson, 2001). Ukrainian schools were, at least theoretically, given priority when delivering textbooks for students and tax cuts were applied for the production of books and textbooks in Ukrainian language (Shulman, 2005). A further attempt to boost Ukrainian was the fast liquidation of Russian language and literature subjects from curricula of state-sponsored schools in Ukrainian already by 1997. Ukrainization was attempted also through a change of attitude toward the Ukrainian language, and in general state, with the introduction of school subjects “We, the citizens of Ukraine” or “Ukraine’s European Choice” and the term *ridna mova* (native language) to refer to Ukrainian, implicitly taking for granted that it would be the native language of all Ukrainians (Polese, 2010).

Language and identity in Ukraine are not necessarily lived exclusively. There is a significant number of Ukrainian citizens able to switch identities or feeling more than one identity (Khmelko, 2004; Polese, 2009). Likewise, and in contrast with the need of a state to classify its citizens as either Russian or Ukrainian speaker, there is a meaningful number of citizens fluent in both languages to the point that the choice use of Russian and Ukrainian in public or private space is not exclusive and the two languages are even sometimes mixed in what has been studied as the *surzhyk* phenomenon (Seriot, 2005). It is, therefore, possible to assume that an official discourse elevating Ukrainian to the sole language of instruction will be supported by most Ukrainian speakers and will generate mixed reactions among Russian speakers. These reactions could go from open political contestation, as it happened in some eastern regions in 2005, making Russian the language of public administration, to tacit agreement with the project. As Shevel (2002) has suggested, the economic opportunities provided by speaking both languages could be a reason why a number of Russian-speaking citizens decided to quietly accept the Ukrainization measures that were adopted after 1989.

This is to show that, at the time of the fieldwork, there were allegedly a strong message conveyed by the Ukrainian state through official channels that Ukrainian was the state language and the language that Ukrainian citizens were supposed to use not only as a medium of instruction and in the public administration but also, in some respects, in their daily life. This message was repeated, and asserted, through several channels including highly questioned official growing figures on Ukrainian speakers in the country (Stebelsky, 2009). Pressures to Ukrainize from the top would also be visible through an attitude suggesting to pupils, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background, that Ukrainian is a “native language.” Our point here is not to debate how many Russians and how many Ukrainian speakers the country hosted. Rather, we are interested in showing that Russian language in Ukraine was (and is) an important language, spoken by large portions of the population and that aggressive Ukrainization measures were likely to encounter some resistance at least among some Russian-speaking segments of the population. Once this happens, what is the result of the negotiation between authorities, and their representatives who have to abide state instructions, and ordinary citizens, especially those who find it difficult to adapt to these instructions? Odessa as a focus for the study was chosen, *inter alia*, for the reason that a large part of its population has a preference for the use of Russian in their daily life. It could thus offer an interesting overview on the possible conflicts between top forces, pushing for Ukrainization of public spaces, and bottom ones, with a significant number of citizens silently resisting and trying to stick to Russian language communication as much as possible.

If we look at the official statistics on native languages in the country they point at the fact that a large portion of the Ukrainian citizens had Russian as a native language (see Table 1). Percentages on the use of Russian and Ukrainian show an even stronger role of Russian across the country (see Table 2).

## **Use of Language in Public Educational Institutions**

As a part of his fieldwork, one of the authors of this article conducted intensive observation in local schools. Schools and educational policy have been at the center of several studies on identity in the country (Janmaat, 2000; Kuzio, 1997/2016; Stepanenko, 1999; Wolczuk, 2000). They are the final user of language and educational measures and are in charge of producing the new generations, including elites, and they are responsible for the attitude of newer generations



toward the country, its institutions, and, in the Ukrainian case, its languages. Six schools were chosen for observation following mainly two principles: elite versus ordinary and Russian versus Ukrainian. Three of the selected schools could be considered “elite schools” that, it was assumed, were more under pressure from city and regional administration to comply with language requirements. They were the ones forming pupils that would enter the best universities, participate in national competitions, and were allegedly getting more funding from the state. The remaining three schools did not enjoy any particular status. They did not offer any particular specialization and were not known for any special quality in the city. It was assumed that their “anonymity” would preserve them from pressures, and they could have more agency when making choices about language use. We use the word “agency” here because, at least officially, all schools have the same obligations, with regard to language use. However, knowing that you, or your pupils, might be regularly checked on language use could put more pressure on teachers and administrator to use Ukrainian more often, at least during official duties, than schools that expect less pressure. Russian versus Ukrainian schools refers to the possibility to have Russian as a mean of instruction in some cases. In principle, it is not different from the case of French or German schools abroad. Internal communication, and teaching, may happen in the official language of instruction but communication with the ministry, and other national institutions, should happen in the national language. Likewise, curricula may be in the language of instruction, but to get accreditation from national authorities, they need also to be in the national language to be sent to the competent authorities. What is reported below are observations and deductions informed from patterns observed in these schools that are, in our view, indicative of the way language use was negotiated in public spaces, and official time, in Odessa.

The teacher enters the classroom and students usually stand up in silence. In some cases some children keep on talking or do not behave the way it was expected from them. The teacher would then address them in Russian asking them to stop and behave. Some technical information might be conveyed and this will predominantly happen in Russian. However, as the class begins, the teacher will switch to Ukrainian and try to continue in the language. In case a student makes a comment in Russian, the teacher can go as far as to translate the

**Table 1.** Linguistic Structure of Ukraine in a Historical Comparison.

Linguistic groups	1991-1994	1995-1999	2000-2003
Ukrainian speaking Ukrainians	41.2	46.3	45.4
Russian speaking Ukrainians	32.6	28.2	30.9
Russian speaking Russians	19.7	17.0	16.5
Other	6.5	8.5	7.2
Total	100	100	100

*Source.* Khmelko (2004).

**Table 2.** Ethnic Composition of Odessa in 1989 and 2001.

1989	2001	% Speaking Their National Language
Ukrainians (48.9%)	Ukrainians (61.6 %)	71.6%
Russians (39.4 %)	Russians (29.0 %)	97.0%
Bulgarians (5.9 %)	Bulgarians (1.3 %)	77.8%
Jewish (1.5 %)	Jewish (1.2 %)	3.6%

*Note.* Data from Ukrainian census.

sentence to Ukrainian. Pupils will not necessarily understand new words in Ukrainian during explanations and the teacher might have to translate them into Russian. Sometimes the teacher will not find the right word in Ukrainian and help out with Russian, still striving to give the impression that the class is in Ukrainian. An interesting attitude is shown by children who get a question from the teacher and are required to answer something. The language chosen for the answer usually depends on whether the student gets it intuitively, and then it will use the language closest to them, usually Russian. If the student gets the answer mnemonically, that is, they

remember it from the textbook (and the textbook is in Ukrainian), then the answer will be in Ukrainian.

As in most schools, children are not always necessarily silent all the time. Once someone gets noisy or disturbs the class, the teacher will ask them to stop. Even if the teacher is explaining in Ukrainian, they will stop, switch to Russian, ask them for a normal behavior, and then get back to Ukrainian for the class. At the end of the class, technical information will be delivered on subsequent classes or future events. This is more likely to happen in Russian. However, if the information refers to some homework and can be related somehow to a (Ukrainian language) textbook or to the curriculum, the teacher might choose to call back the children into Ukrainian, which is the language they are required to be working in. As an informant said once: "Pupils are not Ukrainian speakers, neither I am, but we try our best." Indeed, children gain two separate assets through classes. One is the language and the other is the use of language. While learning a language is a relatively straightforward process, attitude toward language deserves a bit more of reflection here. Bilingualism is not a matter of knowing words and grammar. Social bilingualism is about understanding what to use and when, especially in an environment that is, *de facto*, bilingual. School education is composed of two aspects, an official one and an unofficial one. The boundary between the two is blurred, but there are some social rules and norms that can be regarded as significant for the understanding of language dynamics in schools.

First, the teacher, as teacher, needs to speak Ukrainian, but the teacher, as a person, can speak Russian. Ukrainian is promoted during official time, when the teacher is acting as a representative of the Ukrainian state and is fulfilling their function. Passing information is an official task but respecting the person who is passing this information or knowledge can be interpreted in both ways: Respect toward a teacher or a person. In the majority of cases (those observed at least), communication switches to person-to-person or adult-to-child rather than teacher-to-pupil level so that the public space gets permeated by the private sphere, where the teacher asks to be respected as a person rather than a state representative. Even in bilingual conversations, there is a language that can be considered as primary and one as secondary. This happens in everyday conversation when using a foreign word with friends or when referring to regional variations of a language during informal conversation. The case observed does not substantially differ from this. The teacher and the pupil have in mind that communication is in Ukrainian. However, a substantial degree of flexibility is allowed, from the use of one or two words to a whole sentence. The longer the sentence, or communication in Russian, the farther one risks to drift away from the limits of acceptability. These boundaries are, however, renegotiated on a case-to-case basis, depending on the teacher but, even more important, on the child. Think, for one thing, of someone who just arrived from another school or even country. Ukrainian is the official language and there is a narrative constructed around it that tends to reinforce this belief. The vice director of a gymnasium was provoked by saying that the teaching "history of Odessa" in Ukrainian is a paradox as the whole written history of the city is in Russian. At first, she agreed and stated that, in her school, the teacher is using the local language, Russian (the school has become Ukrainian since 10 years, she said). But when asked if the class could be visited to appreciate the difference with another class that one of the authors had attended in Ukrainian, she immediately renegotiated and said: "It is very likely that the teacher uses Ukrainian, after all." An interpretation could be that, as long as she perceived the conversation as informal, she was ready to admit what was happening in practices. However, as soon as the interlocutor became a scientist, performing official duties, she adopted the position that she would use in other official cases, like when state officers are visiting the school.

Odessa schools are permeated with an official narrative depicting Ukrainian as the only official language. This clashes with the reality in a number of cases, when neither the teacher nor the pupils have the habit of using Ukrainian at official occasions. They both look for a compromise and drift between registers. This is, ultimately, not very far from monolingualistic situations where an official and literary language is used (for instance for official communication within a public office) and then the same person uses a more informal language when leaving their office or the place where an official presentation took place.

## Ukrainian as the Language of Public Administration

During fieldwork, one informant working in the Odessa city council reported that all communication in her and neighbor offices happened in Russian. However, when requested to send an official message to Kiev, the colleague in charge would go hunt for a Ukrainian speaker<sup>2</sup> in the office, or beyond, to translate the message and send everything in Ukrainian to the central administration. This is an interesting attitude, not far from the Soviet saying “they claim to be paying us and we claim to be working for them” and the above dynamic is made possible thanks to a sufficient degree of complicity between the two parts. Odessans strive to give a facade of Ukrainianness and the state does not go deeper into checks on whether this is just the top of the iceberg or a real tendency in the city. One could regard this statement as emblematic for the use of language in the city. Odessa indeed formally complies with the language instructions delivered by the central administration. A Russian speaker is allowed to use their language in private circumstances as long as they use Ukrainian publicly. However, what is the boundary between private and public and who defines it?

Normatively, the city council is a public space. However, if we consider the Ukrainian central administration as the public sphere, a city council could be something more intimate, where tacit complicity between civil servants allows for more flexibility. After all, this is a pattern well known to Ukrainian public servants. I can introduce myself in Ukrainian, but if I am a Russian speaker and I understand that my interlocutor is also, and is comfortable with using Russian publicly, I will switch to Russian even during a public meeting. During a conference in the Odessa oblast, the rector of the National University started his speech in Ukrainian receiving complaints from the public, since the whole audience was Russian speaking and they expected to hear Russian, which was also the main language of the village where the conference was being held. They asked to switch to Russian, a thing that he did immediately after apologizing. He said to be so used to deliver all official speeches in Ukrainian that he did not even think this could be a problem.

Where is the boundary here? We are talking of an official conference and of a civil servant in the implementation of his duties. Would use of Ukrainian be a requirement to show devotion to a country and a cause? During the 2004 events in Kiev both languages, Russian and Ukrainian, were used interchangeably. Ukrainian was preferred politically, and on the scene, to show detachment from Russian culture. However, there was a large degree of tolerance and acceptance toward those not speaking Ukrainian (Polese, 2009, 2016). In some respects, use of Ukrainian is not as important as displaying a positive attitude toward Ukrainian, or simply claiming to be able to speak Ukrainian (regardless of one’s level of proficiency in the language; see Polese & Wylegala, 2008a, 2008b). Likewise, in her research, Sovik (2006) suggested that knowledge of Ukrainian could be displayed as a business card rather than a necessarily significant element of identity.

Ukrainian can become a survival strategy. An informant reported using Ukrainian in Odessa public offices, laboring on the assumption that common people use Russian, so if he was using Ukrainian, he must be someone important, and thus civil servants will reserve a better treatment for him.

The attitude toward both languages on the job market is also indicative of the status of both languages in the country. For public jobs, knowledge of Ukrainian will be required. But it would be extremely difficult to get anything without capacity to interact in Russian. In the private sector, where ideology becomes second to profit making, for several jobs knowledge of Russian will be necessary and this is a situation common to virtually all former USSR republics. If, in the Baltics, ideological positions bring to denial of the use of Russian language in the country, to think of working in the service sector would be extremely unlikely. Some small businesses might get away with the local language plus English, if they target only a particular segment of the population. But for any job requiring interaction with several regions, or virtually any other citizen, bilingualism would be vital when selecting a candidate.

An interesting tendency emerging during fieldwork was the fact that Russian speakers could often display a positive attitude toward Ukrainian by claiming to know it. If they are feeling confident enough they could even switch to Ukrainian at some point of the conversation, sometimes making grammar mistakes, or mixing the two languages, nothing but to show

devotion to a Ukrainian identity or Ukraine as motherland. In this respect, one could say that renegotiation is not necessarily synonymous with resistance. However, the boundary between the two is often blurred, just as much as the public–private divide is not necessarily steady all the time. The Ukrainian state, through an official narrative on identity, claims symbolic domination over public spaces and the way identity is lived and performed by its citizens. A state assumes the duty to harmonize, homogenize, and create standards for the majority of the population, often regardless of whether this is feasible, applicable, or acceptable (Scott, 1998). Ukrainian citizens constantly renegotiate at least two things. One is the very meaning of public space. Is the mere fact of being in a public building sufficient to consider a space a public one? Or there are oases of privateness even in public spaces? What is their boundary? Two Russian speakers meeting informally during a coffee break should follow the state narrative and stick to Ukrainian, or are they dispensed from this since acting as private persons in a particular moment, context, and for a limited amount of time? The second point of negotiation is the use of an official state narrative. A state makes a decision for the majority of the citizens, allegedly for the good of the society. It can likewise propose change, innovation or new habits and attitudes. There is no guarantee, however, that these will be accepted as they are. Identity is a contested territory, based on proposals from the state, about how a particular identity should be lived in a given space, usually public, and renegotiation is part of the game. Ukrainian citizens in Odessa partly challenge, question, and in some situations resist the official narrative on identity. They can refer to a framework of everyday resistance (Scott, 1985), thus avoiding challenging the symbolic order on which a state is based on, and their attempts to use Ukrainian in a number of contexts can be seen as a desire, from both sides, to find a compromise. A state suggests, but does not impose, a model (the Ukrainian language is a prerequisite to Ukrainian identity). Citizens may reject part of that model but try to comply with what they can live with (attitude toward language, use of language in particular contexts). Finally, the state accepts what citizens offer, without deeply controlling or micromanaging the use of language in all particular contexts and moments of allegedly public life.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed public institutional spaces, such as public schools and administrative offices, as meaningful public spaces for negotiating ambiguous boundaries of public and private performances, for informally subverting official public policies and narratives. The two cases discussed here illustrate how, in principle discriminating state policies and official narratives, can be contested, resisted, and subverted, not by means of mass mobilization strategies and protest, but by flexible informal practices of language use. As shown, such informal and sometimes invisible contestations rely largely on a tactical enactment and navigation through public and private, formal and informal, official and unofficial performances. Such a navigation does not only blur the boundaries of these categories but also redraws them, inflicting public spaces with norms and implicit understandings behind private communications. Interestingly, main agents negotiating official policies and narratives are also the ones, to a degree, representing the state. Their position, the positions of public school teachers or public servants, is ambiguous in relation to their primary audiences and beneficiaries, who they are responsible to communicate with in Ukrainian, and are also responsible to ensure the services are meaningful, or in given case understandable and accessible for predominantly Russian-speaking audiences. Furthermore, strict enactment of formal rules is also inconvenient and sometimes unaffordable and complicated for them personally. This duality of commitments then prompts the street-level bureaucrats to, on the one hand, show some commitment to state policy, but on the other hand, such a commitment is only possible to sustain through informal subversion of the same rules. Interestingly, space here is not the marker differentiating public and private, but rather same spaces are imbued with a diversity of performances, accommodating conflicting demands and narratives.

By introducing the concept of informality and everyday resistance, this article challenges the literature on public space to reconsider and broaden the understanding of the political dimension of urban public spaces. Observing informal negotiations, especially in contexts where the

predominantly understanding of political communication channels, be it voting, mass mobilization, or institutionalized civic participation mechanisms of influencing public policy is not strongly present, we submit is important methodologically as well as conceptually. Methodologically it opens up the space for seeing the political dimension in the phenomenon, assumed to apolitical or depoliticized. Conceptually, informality concept challenges the definition of what is political by suggesting that processes and practices beyond the purview and mandate of the state are significantly and meaningfully redrawing power distribution in given societies, and ultimately, might affect state policies as well. However, while observing informal negotiations, resistance and subversion is not the only dimension that becomes visible. Such observations also reveal deep layers of uneven impact state policies can have. Finally, one can always ask to what degree are informal resistances possible in the first place due to state's toleration of certain practices; could the state enforcement apparatus not become more vigorous and repressive on its will? However, in line with the literature problematizing state/citizen dichotomy (Migdal, 2001), we hope this article shows the complication and blurriness of such a divide, and to the least, the possibility of state representatives also undermining what they represent.

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### Notes

1. We refer here in particular to the work of Foster (2002), Fox (2017), Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), and Skey (2011). They were the ones we tried to dialogue with when gathering authors for two collective works that we published in the past months (Polese, Pawlusz, Morris, & Seliverstova, 2017; Polese, Seliverstova, Pawlusz, & Morris, 2018).
2. For this article, Russian and Ukrainian speakers are used to describe someone who, usually fluent in both languages, has some degree of preference for the use of Russian (or Ukrainian).

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